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FOR EUR/NB -- KATHERINE GARRY

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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: NEW DEFENSE COMMITTEE CHAIR DISCUSSES
IRAQ AND RUSSIA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary. On August 15, the Ambassador hosted a luncheon for Mati Raidma, Member of Parliament (MP) and new Chairman of the National Defense Committee (NDC). The two discussed Parliament's upcoming votes to renew the Estonian Defense Forces (EDF) mission mandates for Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and the European Union (EU) Nordic Battle Group (NBG). Raidma reaffirmed the trends we have seen in Parliament: support for Afghanistan, Kosovo, and the EU NBG and division over Iraq. Raidma was cautiously optimistic over the Iraq vote. He predicted that it would be highly politicized, and could be complicated by military resource strains due to Estonia's commitment to the EU NBG. The Ambassador and Raidma also discussed Estonia's relations with Russia, and Moscow's success in sowing division within the EU, frustrating Estonian efforts to push for a common EU voice when dealing with Moscow. End Summary.

Will Estonia Stay the Course in Iraq?

¶2. (SBU) When Parliament reconvenes in the second week of September, all four of Estonia's foreign missions (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Kosovo, and EU NBG) will need to be renewed (each finishes at the end of 2007). Ministry of Defense (MOD) interlocutors have informed us that all four bills are ready to submit to the Government of Estonia (GOE) for Parliament's ratification in the autumn. Raidma's NDC will have the lead in holding debates and bringing the bills to the general parliamentary assembly. Like many other MPs and GOE officials we have spoken to, Raidma did not foresee any difficulty renewing the Afghanistan, Kosovo, and EU NBG missions. However, he predicted a contentious debate over Iraq. Raidma told us discretely that the GOE has the votes in his committee and in the general assembly to pass an Iraq mission extension. However, the Iraq vote still concerns him for two reasons.

¶3. (SBU) First, the Center Party, the largest opposition party in Parliament, is planning to heavily politicize this issue. Ever since the April/May incidents surrounding the removal of the WWII-era Bronze Soldier monument, the Center Party has seen its popularity decline dramatically. Raidma opined that Center is desperate for any political traction with the voters -- and the Iraq mission, widely unpopular with the Estonian public, gives it that opportunity. As there are no other controversial bills on the horizon, Raidma predicted that Center would hammer the GOE on Iraq for the foreseeable future to rehabilitate its sinking popularity. Raidma noted further that the Center Party will undoubtedly capitalize on the ongoing U.S. debate over troop withdrawals from Iraq. (Note. Reftel noted our discussions with other MPs from other parties which have

supported Raidma's analysis. End Note.)

¶4. (SBU) Secondly, Raidma was concerned about the potential pitfalls of the EU NBG, a rapid-reaction force that Brussels would send to global hot-spots. Estonia has seconded up to 60 troops to participate in the EU NGB. Christian Liflander, MOD Director for Policy Planning, told us that the French are lobbying very hard that the EU NBG be sent to central Africa (e.g., Darfur) for peace-support operations. With the Estonian Defense Forces (EDF) already straining to meet its current operational commitments, an ambitious EU NBG mission to a military hotspot could be the straw that breaks the camel's back. With a small number of professional soldiers, the EDF has heavily relied on their best-trained troops, the "Scouts Battalion," for Afghanistan and Iraq. Using the Scouts Battalion for an additional operation does not seem possible and sending Estonian reservists and/or national guardsmen with limited training into a volatile environment would be a dangerous proposition. Raidma explained: "If the Battle Group does go to Africa, MPs may decide to vote against the Iraq mission to shift our resources to the Battle Group." (Note. MOD interlocutors have also expressed to us their concerns that an ambitious EU NBG mission may overwhelm EDF resources. End Note.)

Russia is a Concern for Everyone

¶5. (SBU) In Raidma's opinion, Estonia's recent crisis with Russia is only the extreme version of a disturbing trend emanating from Moscow. He is disturbed by the Russian revisionist attitude towards history, and recent unfounded accusations of fascism used to deflect any external

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criticism against the Government of Russia (GOR). Raidma shared with us an anecdote to illustrate. On a recent trip to NATO Headquarters, he met with a Russian Duma delegation also visiting NATO. Raidma witnessed Duma delegates accusing NATO officials of being untrustworthy "for not keeping their promises." They cited NATO membership for the Balts as an example of NATO's "lies to Russia" as NATO had "guaranteed this would not happen." The Duma delegation's tone disturbed Raidma much more than the substance of their accusations.

¶6. (SBU) Unfortunately, in Raidma's opinion, Russia's tactics to sow division within the EU have proven very effective. "What Europe needs is a common voice when dealing with Russia," Raidma complained, "but we are not even close to achieving this." The EU's temerity in standing up to Russia has only encouraged Moscow to become more aggressive in its behavior. For this reason, he assured us that the GOE, Parliament, and the Estonian public continue to see NATO as the foundation of Estonian and European security.

¶7. (SBU) Comment. Even with Raidma's assurances that the GOE has the votes to pass the Iraq bill, post will monitor closely any possible political skirmishes over Iraq, and possible impact on the EDF of personnel shortages arising from competing missions like the EU NBG.

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